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AUTHOR Townsend, Barbara K.
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ABSTRACT

This paper questions the effects of middle-class student enrollment on the historical institutional mission of community colleges--offering access to higher education to groups who might otherwise not be able to attend college. Because higher education is viewed as a public good that also contributes to individual socioeconomic mobility, the two-year college has been traditionally supported as a vehicle for opening up access to higher education. As a result, some have asserted that the community college's first priority should be to serve students not typically accepted into higher education. The author argues that recent admission and curricular trends are attracting students who do not fit this profile. The article lists high school dual enrollment programs, four-year college concurrent enrollment programs, and "reverse transfer" trends as evidence of these changing enrollment patterns. The paper argues that this trend can jeopardize access for other groups when enrollment is limited. Community college leaders need to decide whether the mission of meeting any and all community needs takes precedence over its mission of providing education for those who would not normally participate in higher education. (Contains 26 references.) (NB)

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Four-Year College Students' Use of the Community College: A Middle-Class Takeover?[1]

Barbara K. Townsend
University of Missouri-Columbia
townsendb@missouri.edu

The development of the community college has been partially fueled by concerns for societal equity or fairness. Because higher education is viewed as a public good that also contributes to individual socioeconomic mobility, the two-year college has been supported as a vehicle for opening up access to higher education. Over time the community college has become "the most common point of entry into higher education for those groups that have traditionally been excluded from higher education" (Brint & Karabel, 1989, p. vi).

While there is a stream of literature that views the community college as a means of maintaining educational and thus socioeconomic stratification, (e.g., Karabel, 1972; Dougherty, 1994), the prevailing popular view of the community college is that it "'democratize[s]' American higher education" (Brint & Karabel, 1989, p. 9) through serving the "less-advantaged," defined as "poor, working-class, and minority students" (Pincus, 1994, p. 625). Many community college leaders are proud of what they see as the institution's "unique charge: to receive anybody from anywhere with the equivalent of a high school diploma and begin the process by which these students move to higher achievement (e.g., Mellow, 2001, p. 3). As example, in 1997 minority students constituted 30 percent of community college enrollments, compared to over 24 percent of the four-year college enrollment (Phillippe, 2000). Also, the typical community college student comes from a middle to lower-class socioeconomic background and from an academically undistinguished background (Cohen & Brawer, 1996).

Given this charge to serve "anybody from anywhere," some have argued that the community college's first priority should be to serve students not typically accepted into higher education (e.g., Templin, 1983). However, recent admission and curricular trends are attracting students who do not fit this profile. Once thought to be the province of students who couldn't afford to go to four-year colleges or who weren't academically able to succeed at them, the community college now plays an important role in the lives of many four-year college students. Some four-year college students have earned community college credits through high school dual enrollment programs and transfer these credits to the four-year college where they officially start their postsecondary education. Also, four-year college students take community college courses concurrently

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with their four-year college courses, while still others take two-year college courses in the summer. Another enrollment pattern is for four-year students to "reverse transfer" to community colleges and become two-year college students. A variant of this pattern is for those who already have a baccalaureate degree or higher to enroll in the community college for credit courses.

While these enrollment patterns can be interpreted as demonstrations of how the community college serves a variety of community needs, these patterns could also be construed as a middle-class takeover of the institution at the expense of students whose only educational opportunity is the community college. This paper will review these enrollment patterns and provide alternative interpretations of their effects upon the community college, including perceptions of its overall mission.

Community College Enrollment Patterns of Four-Year College Students

Undergraduate four-year college students use the community college in two major ways: (1) to help attain the baccalaureate quickly and cheaply, and (2) to rethink their educational and career goals and perhaps seek new ones.

Some four-year college students use the community college to complete the baccalaureate more quickly and inexpensively than by the conventional route of taking courses only at the four-year college at which they begin their higher education. High school dual enrollment programs provide one way to do so. These programs enable high school students to earn college credits while still in high school by taking courses that earn both high school and college credit (hence the term "dual enrollment"). In what the Education Commission of the States has labeled "college high programs" (Hale, 2001), the courses are taught at the high school by high school faculty with curriculum and standards set by the college sponsoring the courses. As a result, even before they graduate from high school and matriculate at a four-year college, some students have earned community college credits through these programs. Although the students may never have set foot on a community college campus and were not officially admitted to the community college, dual enrollment course credits are "transferred" to the four-year college in which the students enroll after high school graduation.[2] State Higher Education Executive Officers estimated that almost 205,000 high school students took dual enrollment courses in 1995-96 (Crooks, 1998). Enrollment figures for selected states indicate that in 1996-97 over 26,000 Florida high school students took dual enrollment courses (Windham, 1997). In Missouri the fall 1999 unduplicated headcount enrollment in these courses was 20,373 students (CBHE, 2001).

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[2] Because of the IPEDS definition for classifying first-time freshmen, students who have dual enrollment credits are counted as first-time freshmen the first term in which they enroll after high school graduation. Thus a high school student who earns 15 dual enrollment credits from a community college would not be counted as a two-year college transfer student, should s/he matriculate at a four-year college, even though the course credits are transferred from the community college to the four-year college.

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Concurrent enrollment at a community college and four-year college also escalates the rate of baccalaureate attainment for four-year college students. Students considers the four-year college to be their "home" institution, but they take courses at a nearby community college so as to accumulate course credits more quickly. Other reasons why four-year students take two-year courses include their belief that "community college courses are easier or, in any case, their grades won't be reflected on their university transcript and affect their GPA; [and because] they wish to avoid certain faculty at the university" (Catanzaro, p. 29, 1999). By proceeding in this manner, four-year college students can lessen the overall tuition cost of their baccalaureate since the cost of two-year college courses is less than that of four-year courses. The average tuition at public community colleges in 1997-98 was $1,318 as compared to $3,110 at public four-year colleges and $13,392 at independent four-year colleges (Phillippe, 2000). The extent of concurrent enrollment nationally is unknown. However, in his examination of several national data bases concerning student enrollment, Adelman (1999) found that 18% of those who completed the baccalaureate had "engaged in alternating or simultaneous enrollment patterns" (p. viii). In Oregon almost 1,100 students were concurrently enrolled in a community college and one of the institutions in the Oregon University System during 1997-98 (Oregon University System, 2000). In Missouri during fall 2000, over 2,200 students were concurrently enrolled in two or more public higher education institutions (CBHE, 2001).

Taking community college courses during the summer is another pattern that facilitates four-year college students' attaining the bachelor's degree. Labeled "summer sessioners" by Hagadorn and Castro (1999), these students earn community college credits in the summer and transfer them in the fall to their four-year college. A survey of Moraine Valley Community College's summer sessioners indicates that four-year college students take two-year courses in the summer for several reasons: to save on college tuition, to accrue college credits more quickly, to improve grade point average, to have an easier fall schedule, and to make up a course or courses failed at the four-year college (*Reverse Transfer Project*, 1999). Nationally how many four-year college students take community college courses during the summer is not known, but a few single-institution studies provide some insight into the extent of this enrollment pattern. A 1989 study of enrollment patterns at Mount San Antonio [Community] College in California revealed that over 20% of students taking classes in summer 1988 were from four-year colleges (Mount San Antonio College, 1989). At Moraine Valley Community College (IL), almost 1,500 four-year students from over 150 colleges were enrolled in summer 1999 (*Reverse Transfer Project,* 1999). Among a sample of 605 University of Memphis (TN) students who had transferred from four area two-year colleges during fall 1994 through spring 1998, over 5% had taken summer courses at a two-year college *after* transferring to the University (Townsend, 2000).

Four-year college students may also use the community college to rethink their educational and career goals. Having started at a four-year college, some "reverse transfer" to attend a two-year college for a while, perhaps with the intention of transferring again to the four-year sector. Others choose a certificate or applied associate degree program leading to immediate employment after graduation. It is currently

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estimated that about 13% of two-year college students nationally are undergraduate reverse transfers (Townsend, 1999). However, the percentage within individual colleges varies greatly.

When four-year college students reverse transfer, they become two-year college students only, unlike four-year college students who concurrently enroll in the community college or who attend it during the summer. Another group that becomes two-year college students only are those individuals who have completed a baccalaureate degree or higher and decide to attend the community college, sometimes for personal interests and sometimes for career development. In fall 1999 over 28% of two-year college students in non-credit courses had a bachelor's degree or higher. In fact, 10% of non-credit students had at least a master's degree. Among credit-bearing students, 2.5% of full-time students and 8% of part-time students were post-baccalaureate students (Phillippe & Valiga, 2000). Noting this phenomenon, some community college leaders are claiming the institution is now a "'graduate school'" (Catanzaro, 1999, p. 33).

Interpretations of These Patterns

The community college's enrollment of four-year college students and post-baccalaureate students can be interpreted in a variety of ways. The conventional interpretation is that the community college is simply meeting community needs of several groups: 1) four-year students who wish to attain the baccalaureate quickly and inexpensively; (2) reverse transfers who wish to rethink their academic and professional plans, and (3) post-baccalaureate individuals who desire lifelong learning. These needs have equal priority with the needs of any other community members.

Alternatively, the community college could be seen as meeting the needs of these groups at the expense of other, more stereotypical community college students. Who are the most appropriate students for the two-year college has been a question almost from the institution's inception. As regards the students described in this paper, two-year colleges were not always sure that admitting reverse transfers was appropriate. Assuming that most potential reverse transfers had not done well in the four-year sector, some two-year college faculty and administrators during the 1960s and 1970s viewed them as "academically deficient" (Meadows & Ingle, 1968). Their admission had to be justified under the mission of providing them "a second chance" (e.g., Meadows & Ingle, 1968) through the two-year college's "salvage" function (Berry, 1969). As institutional studies began to show that reverse transfers were often highly capable students who chose to attend the community college for financial or logistical reasons rather than academic ones, community colleges began to recruit them (Catanzaro, 1999; Townsend, 2000). As example, a year or so ago Johnson County Community College (JCCC) in Kansas had a recruitment brochure which spotlighted reverse transfer students as one kind of JCCC student.

Meeting the needs of four-year college undergraduates who seek concurrent enrollment or attendance during summer school is rarely, if ever, questioned by institutional leaders. Similarly, enrolling post-baccalaureates is not usually challenged since their attendance

benefits the community college in several ways. First of all, post-baccalaureates increase institutional enrollment if there are no restrictions on institutional growth. Their attendance also improves the community college's image in some people's minds. If people who already have a bachelor's degree decide to go to the community college, then it must be a quality institution. Post-baccalaureate students can also serve as role models for traditional two-year college students and sources of advice about attending a four-year college. Additionally in this era of accountability, post-baccalaureate students can serve to increase an institution's retention and program completion rates, since those in degree programs tend to complete them (Winter & Harris, 1999).

For community colleges there is a downside to enrolling post-baccalaureates and four-year college students: the "opportunity costs associated with college access for other student groups" (Winter & Harris, 1999, p. 26). When enrollments are limited, because of finances or program selectivity, the issue of which student groups are served can emerge. Institutional leaders need to be aware that when enrollment is on a first-come, first-serve basis, the result may be four-year students displacing two-year students in summer courses or in academic year courses because of concurrent enrollment. Similarly, when admission to particular programs is selective, reverse transfers and post-baccalaureates may displace people who have never attended college and for whom the community college is the only choice for higher education. Lambert's (1994) qualitative study of post-baccalaureate students attending two Baltimore community colleges found that these students were more apt to be admitted to two highly community college competitive programs than were students without baccalaureates.

Community college leaders need to decide whether the mission of meeting any and all community needs takes precedence over its mission of providing education for those who would not normally participate in higher education. Admitting four-year college students and post-baccalaureate students benefits the community college financially by increasing its enrollments. Their admission also creates a more middle-class, academically credible student body, thus upgrading the institution in some people's minds. Alternatively, their admission can displace the very students whose admission has justified the community college's existence for decades.

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